

# Darkhouse Spearfishing Basics

By Jay Leitch  
Photos Provided by Jay Leitch

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*Editor's note: The 2001 North Dakota State Legislature passed House Bill 1356 allowing darkhouse spearfishing for residents. Nonresidents may spearfish in North Dakota only if their state of residency allows North Dakotans to spearfish from dark houses.*

*This is a new activity for most North Dakota winter anglers; however, it is an activity Minnesota anglers have enjoyed for some time. Jay Leitch, a veteran of darkhouse spearfishing in Minnesota, volunteered to share his expertise about what was necessary to get set up for darkhouse spearfishing and provided us with a primer on the basics of winter spearfishing.*

I have been spearfishing in Minnesota for more than 40 years so I was excited when the 2001 Legislature passed legislation allowing it in North Dakota. What follows is an overview of equipment needed and how to get started.

You can get started darkhouse spearing for less than \$200, or you can spend several thousand dollars on equipment. The basic equipment needs are: something to cut a large hole in the ice, a dark house, a spear, an ice skimmer, and something to decoy the fish into view.

# Cutting the Hole

Spearers face a much bigger challenge cutting holes through the ice than do other winter anglers who can simply auger a 6-8 inch hole through the ice. Holes, from 2 feet by 2 feet to 2 feet by 6 feet and even larger, can be cut with an ice saw, chain saw, power auger, ice chisel, or ax.

Manual ice saws cut through ice easily, at least until the ice gets real thick. After ice is about 15 inches thick I usually use a power auger to bore eight or 10 holes, then cut between the holes with the saw. It takes me about ten minutes to cut a hole, even in 30-plus inch thick ice.

Some darkhouse spearers use chain saws to cut the hole, but starting them in the cold weather is sometimes a problem. The most serious problem using a chain saw is that oil from the chain may get into the hole making it difficult to see.

I almost always use a power auger to cut spearing holes when ice is thick, unless I am somewhere remote where weight and bulk are a factor. Eight or 10 holes bored with an 8 or 10 inch power auger can open a large spearing hole in a few minutes. All that is left is to chop out the area between the holes with a chisel, or cut it with an ice saw.

Ice chisels (\$15 to \$50-plus) are used to cut the hole, straighten out the edges when the hole has been cut with an auger, used as a pry bar to move the house around, and to chop the house loose after

it has frozen in. Chisels can be purchased at sporting goods stores, from blacksmiths, or be homemade. Weight and cutting edge are important characteristics of good chisels. Ice chisels need a ring or hole in the handle to run a short piece of rope through to put around your wrist, since it is surprisingly easy to drop one through the ice.

The larger chunks of ice can be removed from the hole using ice tongs, a shovel, or the chisel, or they can be broken into smaller pieces. Some spearers push the big piece under the ice, but this might get in the way of decoy lines or spook fish. I usually push the chunk under the ice if it is less than 6 or 8 inches thick. Any thicker than that and I pull it out with ice tongs. Remember to push the big chunks back in the hole when you leave – they are dangerous to vehicles if left on the ice.



# Darkhouse

A dark house is probably the most important component of a spearer's equipment. These shelters are made of canvas, plywood, buffalo board, chipboard and just about any other material the builder can gather. An adequate shelter can be put together using scrap materials for little more than the price of some new hardware. Commercially made portable darkhouses are also available.

Weight, warmth, and darkness are the primary considerations in shelter construction. Shelters are frequently pulled and moved around by hand. Thus, they need to be lightweight, but weight is also a consideration for stability when the

winter winds blow across the ice. Lightweight dark houses can be blown for miles across the lake if they are not frozen down or otherwise secured. Some people use one or more short ropes tied to the house and frozen into holes in the ice.

Darkness is, of course, what gives the dark house its name. It must be dark so the spearer can see into the water, so light or shadows do not spook the fish. Dark

houses need to be big enough to accommodate the spearer, a stove, and at least a 2x2 foot spearing hole.

The most common size darkhouse is 4x6 feet. Some shelters are 4x8 feet with spearing holes in each end, others are 6x6 with 2x6 foot holes. The spearing hole needs to be large, yet not so large that it is both difficult to cut and keep open. I like a spearing hole of about 2x3 or 2x4 feet. One advantage of a portable shelter is that I can cut a hole about any size I want, as long as I leave room for my chair. Larger holes are nice, especially when the fish are not decoying in close, but they are difficult to cut in thick ice, more work to keep open, and are more of a safety hazard when the house is moved.

Shelter heaters are about as varied as the shelters and are necessary for comfort on really cold days. Kerosene or propane heaters are used to heat most dark houses, although some people use other methods ranging from wood burning heaters to solar heaters. The perfect dark house would be lightweight, inexpensive, easy to transport, have all the necessary conveniences, be easy to keep warm, and come with a hole already in the ice.



# Spears

The spear (\$20 to \$200-plus) is the rod-and-reel of the darkhouse fisherman. The ideal darkhouse spear is one with five tines, a 6 foot handle, and just enough weight so it goes straight. The 6 foot handle lets one get the spear in the water far enough so refraction doesn't affect aim. A rope or line attaching the spear to the dark house, chair, or your arm or leg is also necessary. The line should be at least 1 1/2 times the length of the spear.



## Darkhouse Spearing Regulations

1. Registration is required. One can register by using the internet (Game and Fish home page) or at any Game and Fish office.
2. Allowed for all residents with a valid fishing license, and those under the age of 16. Nonresidents whose state allows North Dakota residents to participate in darkhouse spearfishing can darkhouse spearfish in North Dakota with a valid fishing license.
3. Length of season from December 1 through February.
4. A spear is counted as a pole (line) while darkhouse spearfishing.
5. Legal species are northern pike and nongame species.
6. Daily/possession limits are the same as for hook and line fishing.
7. No size limit on ice hole in lakes where darkhouse spearing is allowed.
8. Legal live baitfish, except white sucker, and artificials can be used as decoys.
9. Darkhouse spearing allowed only in the following areas:

# Decoys

The two primary methods of luring fish into view are live and artificial decoys. Store-bought decoys are either plastic or wood, although I have also seen cast aluminum decoys. The wood decoys have a carved body, usually with metal fins and weighted with lead. The weight, fins, and eye-hook need to be placed just right so the decoy swims when the string is pulled. Metal tails can be bent so the decoy swims either clockwise or counter-clockwise. It is important to have some that swim each way so the decoy string doesn't become twisted. One characteristic universal among decoys is that they do not have fish-hooks on them.

The most common live decoys, where legal, are suckers, perch, shiners, and chubs. They are usually from 8 to 12 inches long, but can be over 15 inches long, depending on preference. Northerns more readily grab the small ones and sometimes it only takes one grab to kill a decoy. However, smaller decoys seem to live longer than the bigger ones.

Live decoys are presented in a variety of ways. I prefer a 10 or 12 inch noose made of 20 pound test braided line



attached to a weighted leader. The amount of weight used depends on the size of decoy. Others use safety-pins through the back just forward of the dorsal fin.

# The Technique

Many decisions need to be made about where to put the dark house: which lake, where on the lake, how deep, how close to other houses, which way to set it relative to the sun, and if the ice is safe. If the ice is safe to drive on, that makes it easier than having to pull, push, and drag the house to just the right spot. This is where portable houses are a blessing.

There are fewer useable accesses to the lakes in winter, especially when the snow is deep or drifted. As ice gets thicker and the weather colder, it may expand and push up on shore making it difficult to drive onto the lake. Deep or wind-blown snow on the lake can also cause problems getting around. Snow also adds weight on the ice, sometimes resulting in water on top of the ice.

Finding just the right place to put the dark house is more important than finding a place to fish in open water. If you want to move in open water, it's just a matter of pulling up the anchor. With a dark house, moving involves cutting a new hole. Some darkhouse spearkers put their houses on the same spot every winter, probably no more than a few feet from where they were the winter before. This is easy on small lakes or close to shore, but a mile or two from shore on a large lake it is sometimes hard to find the same spot.

Contour maps can help find a spot if there are no other dark houses on the lake. The right spot is usually 6 to 12 feet deep, preferably on or near a drop-off. There should be a weed bed nearby as cover for bait fish and habitat for north-erns.

If there are no other houses around, and you are unfamiliar with the lake, cut test holes to check depth and bottom. A test hole cut with the chisel or auger should be big enough to look through. Simply clear the ice chips, put a blanket or parka over your head, and check out the lake bottom. If you can't see the bottom it is either too deep, the water is murky, or the bottom is dark. Too deep means it is time to try to find a shallower spot. Murky water means go to another lake. Dark bottom means something may be needed on the bottom to lighten it up.

**BURKE COUNTY**  
Powers Lake

**EMMONS COUNTY**  
Rice Lake

**FOSTER COUNTY**  
Juanita Lake

**KIDDER COUNTY**  
Lake Etta  
Horsehead Lake  
Round Lake

**LAMOURE COUNTY**  
Flood Lake

**LOGAN COUNTY**  
Beaver Lake  
West Napoleon Lake

**McHENRY COUNTY**  
Buffalo Lodge Lake

**McINTOSH COUNTY**  
Coldwater Lake  
Dry/Goose Lake

**LAKE SAKAKAWEA**  
Garrison Dam to Hwy 85  
bridge at Williston

**RAMSEY COUNTY**  
Cavanaugh Lake  
Devils Lake  
Morrison Lake  
Sweetwater Lake

**ROLETTE COUNTY**  
Carpenter Lake  
School Section Lake

**SARGENT COUNTY**  
Buffalo Lake  
Grass Lake

**SHERIDAN COUNTY**  
Coal Mine Lake

**STUTSMAN COUNTY**  
Mallard Marsh  
Spiritwood Lake

**NELSON COUNTY**  
Lake Laretta

**WILLIAMS COUNTY**  
Cottonwood Lake

**LAKE OAHE**  
South Dakota border to  
McLean Bottoms boat  
ramp



## Setting Up

The first look down a freshly cut hole is always exciting. You never know what to expect, except on some lakes where bottom conditions are fairly uniform. There might be a rock pile to the left, a tree branch to the right, tall weeds straight ahead, or a rusting can right below.

After taking a quick look, it is time to clean the ice chips from the hole. When this is done, go outside and bank up the places where light is still shining through and bring the rest of your gear into the darkhouse. It will take a few minutes for your eyes to adjust before you can see well.



## Ice Savvy

The best rule-of-thumb for ice fishing safety is that the ice on the lake is never completely safe. The ice should be even, well-formed blue ice. Generally ice two to four inches thick will support one person, five inches will support a snowmobile or ATV, and eight to 12 inches will support an automobile. Conditions at freeze-up often determine the strength of ice and thickness alone should not be the only factor when considering whether ice is safe or not.

Using common sense is the best advice to make a fishing trip on the ice a safe one. Check beforehand to learn the locations of springs, inlets, aerators and known thin ice. Stay off unfamiliar areas. Know how to get out of a vehicle if it goes through and know how to rescue someone who has fallen through the ice.

## This Is It! You're Spearing!

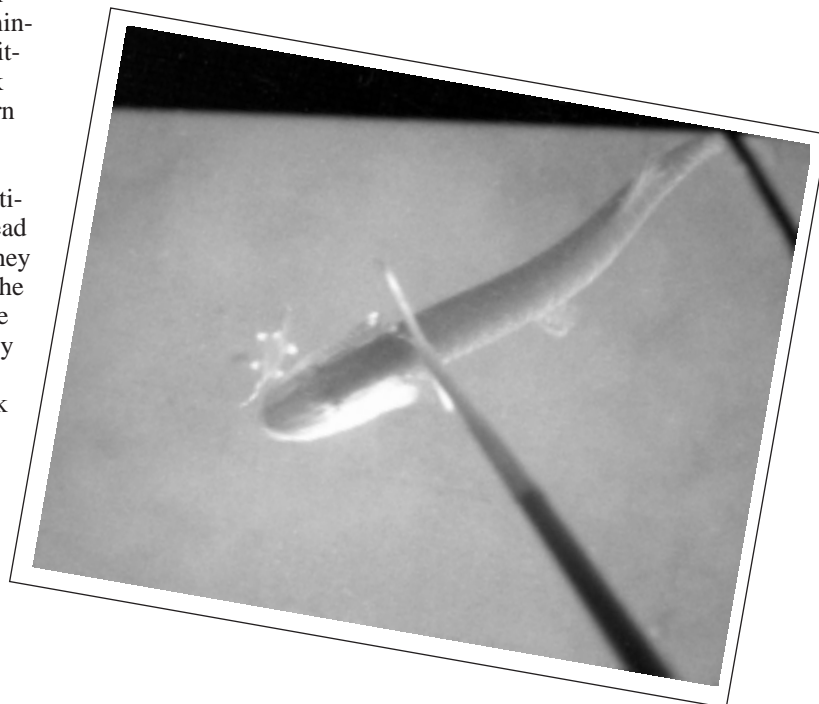
Put the decoy in the water about half way to the bottom and wait. When you least expect it, a northern may slide into view. Many other species swim through for a look around, some attracted by the decoy, others just going about their business. You can expect to see just about any species of fish.

When perch or other fish leave in a hurry, all in the same direction, it is time to get ready because a larger fish is not far behind. Sometimes it's just a little northern, a walleye, or a bass. Sometimes nothing comes into view and the perch come back. Other times a northern will lazily swim in, stare at the decoy for minutes, and just as lazily leave. Most exciting is when they charge in like a streak and either hit the decoy, miss it and turn around for another try, or hit/miss and leave.

When a northern gets a taste of an artificial decoy, it will usually shake its head and leave in a hurry. However, when they miss it, they often come right back in the hole and try again. When they hit a live decoy and take it out under the ice, they can often be pulled back in, or, if they drop the decoy, they usually come back looking for it. All of this usually happens in just seconds, the seconds that make all the work and waiting worthwhile, but it is a time for care. If a spear tine hits the floor or the ice, or you bump the wall, most of the time the northern will leave in a flash, but not always. Sound travels almost five times faster in water (1,400 to 1,550

meters per second) than in air (330 to 340 meters per second).

Spearing fish in six or more feet of water isn't as easy as it may seem. Refraction makes fish appear where they aren't, makes the spear appear to bend where it meets the water, and often causes the novice spearer to miss the target. I generally put my spear at least half way into the water and watch the spear head and the fish, ignoring the "bend" in the spear handle at the waterline. Then, with a short jab, the spear hits its mark right behind the northern's head.



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